A New Start

California for much of its history was a powerfully attractive force for people around the world, where Russian, Spanish, and Native American societies at one time existed in relative proximity. After Mexican independence from Spain in 1821, California was a Mexican province for a quarter century, before becoming an independent republic for about a month in summer 1846, when the United States annexed it. The discovery of gold in 1848 at Sutter’s Mill in Coloma sparked a global rush of people to extract the precious metal. As a result, California bypassed territory status to become, in 1850, the thirty-first state of the United States. Since statehood, California has profoundly influenced American society through its predominance in a wide range of sectors, including mass entertainment, technology, industry, politics both liberal and conservative, youth culture, and viniculture.

The Central Valley, to which many Mennonites migrated, is large. About 450 miles long and ranging anywhere between 40 and 120 miles in width, it contains some 15 million acres of tremendously fertile land if heavily irrigated, making it one of the most significant agricultural regions
in the country. Mennonites, like countless others, moved to California for reasons of economics, health, and climate. They mostly came from the Great Plains. In the years 1887 to 1939, for instance, Oklahoma, Kansas, and Nebraska represented 43.5 percent of the total Mennonite migration to California. That Mennonites, a traditionally rural people, were attracted to California is not surprising. Nor were the early settlements exceptional in what is now the Los Angeles basin, an agricultural region in the early twentieth century. The migratory experience for the Mennonites was not new either. Moving to California was part of a long history of uprooting and seeking new homes from Europe to North America and now beyond the American Midwest. Those rural experiences, however, quickly became urban ones. In the twentieth century, massive immigration and rapid urbanization shaped California. Although California represented less than 2 percent of the national population in 1900, by the early twenty-first century that proportion increased sixfold, as seen in table 3. Mennonites responded to these developments through strategies that embraced modernity. Their strategies ultimately reshaped traditional identities and made Mennonites active participants in larger society.

Mennonite Forty-Niners

Before Mennonites settled permanently in California, some came searching for gold. Johannes Dietrich Dyck was most likely the first Mennonite in California. Our only source of his experience is the narration given by his great-grandson, Cornelius J. Dyck, based on his elder’s diary. Johannes Dyck, born in West Prussia in 1826, arrived in New York on November 2, 1848. Soon, news of golden riches in California drifted his way, and he dreamed of returning to his fiancée in Prussia with a fortune in hand. By February 1850 he had earned enough money to travel to California. Dyck actually struck gold and three years later planned the long return trip to Prussia. Shortly thereafter, he lost all his gold in a Native American attack. Returning to the mines, he worked on and off for several years but never struck it rich. Finally he generated enough income to return to Prussia in 1858, when he married his fiancée of ten years.

Joseph Summers was another Mennonite forty-niner. According to his obituary, he was born on October 11, 1823, in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. After he married on December 8, 1846, he and his wife moved to Holmes County, Ohio, where they settled on a farm for seventeen years.
During this time, Summers made two trips to California, one to start a mining company and the other simply to "live there." In fall 1850, he and twelve other men from Zanesville, Ohio, arrived in Dry Town, California, to start the Zanesville Mining Company. The obituary gives no details as to his success or failure but simply recounts, "His anecdotes of this journey and the valuable lessons he drew from his observations afforded many an hour's profitable entertainment." His second trip was a six-year move, and there his story falls silent.

These two documents, the diary and the obituary, offer virtually no detail of California life but are effective symbols for the place of California in Mennonite historiography. In sketching out the setting of early Mennonite settlement in California, this chapter explores their beginnings in Southern California and the San Joaquin Valley. Though I follow these experiences along lines of specific denominational development—General Conference (GC), Mennonite Brethren (MB), and Mennonite Church (MC)—a strict chronology becomes fluid for clarity.
Beginnings in Southern California

By the late 1880s and 1890s, a trickle of Mennonites were moving to Southern California in search of what many other Americans and migrants from around the world also sought: improved health, improved economic status—primarily through agriculture for the Mennonites—and to start life over.9 Perhaps in response to falling commodity prices in the Midwest and the economic contractions of the 1890s, migration to California became more attractive. Mennonites moving to Los Angeles in the final dozen years of the nineteenth century found themselves in the midst of a phenomenal population explosion. From 1880 to 1890 Los Angeles’s population grew by 351 percent, and in the next decade another 103 percent; by 1910 the number of residents increased by another 212 percent. Outside of New York and Pennsylvania, four of the top six states exporting people to Southern California were in the Midwest, and all had significant Mennonite populations. The call to California was not only loud but also well received. By the time Mennonites began to move and settle in, the religious and racial diversity of the Los Angeles area was staggering for its time, as was the speed of its development. Furthermore, various denominations perceived that new, some would call looser, methods of religious ministry and practice were necessary to account for the relative isolation, climate, and frontier qualities of Southern California.10

Large-scale Protestant migration to Southern California did not begin until the 1860s, and it took until the late 1880s for it to displace Roman Catholicism in terms of political influence. When the Southern Pacific Railroad and Santa Fe line reached Los Angeles in 1876 and 1885, the movement of peoples from other states intensified. Many of these state-side migrants were religious, likely Protestant, and in 1890, 36 percent of Los Angeles’s 50,395 inhabitants were churchgoers. Los Angeles was in a state of dissonance at the start of the twentieth century. By the measure of church attendance, it was among the most religious cities of the American West, with an ever-growing religious diversity, and yet it was a frontier town replete with much gambling, prostitution, alcohol, and political graft. Through it all, Protestants struggled to have an influence on the City of Angels.11

Jacob Hege was an early GC leader of a congregation near Paso Robles, the first recognized Mennonite congregation in California. He was a pastor
from Wisner, Nebraska, who became interested in California through his brother-in-law, Dr. Jacob Horsch. Hege visited Horsch, already living in California, who introduced him to a man selling land in San Luis Obispo County. Afterwards, Hege decided to move and invited other Mennonites to join him, describing the land he saw as ideal for farming and the mild coastal climate as perfect for the sick and elderly. The sale deadline was July 1, 1896. He hoped to hear of people willing to move by at least May 15. Not until June, however, did he receive a letter from Jacob Claassen of Beatrice, Nebraska, who wanted to join him. That October, they, with their families, apparently purchased land and boarded a train headed west. They arrived in San Miguel on November 1, 1896. Other Men-
nonite families followed, and within a year, they formed a congregation east of Paso Robles. Hege, who arrived in 1897, became their minister and helped fulfill an assumed Mennonite practice: “Wherever Mennonites settled, they always held Sunday services.”13 This pattern of combining the pursuit of new opportunities with traditional religious practices repeated itself well into the twentieth century.

Also that year, 1897, another group of Mennonites—comprising six families from Beatrice, Nebraska, led by Aron J. Wiebe—settled ten miles northwest of Paso Robles. The two groups agreed to start a church together.14 Though two different settlements, they saw themselves as the same congregation—the San Marcos Mennonite Church. Because of the geographic distance between them, they maintained separate meetings and meeting places, holding a co-operative monthly “union meeting.” In 1903, they called a joint council meeting to discuss their relationship. Despite some discussion to merge, they formalized their separate identities, as the geographic distance between proved too significant. Thus, the San Marcos Mennonite Church dissolved. The more eastern group, which then moved into Paso Robles, reorganized as the First Mennonite Church of Paso Robles, with twenty-five charter members and Jacob Hege as their minister, until 1906, when he left for Idaho.15 The northwestern group reorganized and in 1904 reclaimed the name San Marcos Mennonite Church, then moved to Willow Creek. They became, in 1943, the Second Mennonite Church of Paso Robles and in 1954 renamed themselves Willow Creek Mennonite Church.16

At about the same time as the early developments in the Paso Robles area, in the late 1880s and 1890s, approximately 240 miles south, Mennonites seeking improved health were coming to Southern California. In 1887, Henry Rees, from Ashland, Ohio, moved to Pomona, California, and over the next six years found company with other Mennonite families, who came mostly from Illinois. These families, independent of each other, moved throughout Southern California to places like Pomona, Cuacamonga, and Pasadena. Finally, in 1897, a large enough group settled in Upland that a church was created a few years later. In an early 1898 report to the Board of Home Missions of the General Conference, J. B. Baer, home mission and field secretary for the General Conference, noted there was a congregation in “St. Louis, Obispo County” (sic) with fifty members who were confident more families would come and settle there. They became the Upland First Mennonite Church in 1903.17
Going to California was optimistic about their future in California, and they established a number of churches by the mid-1930s. These churches were located in cities and towns such as Los Angeles (1918), Winton (1921), and Shafter (1935). By 1955, however, their numbers totaled only sixteen hundred.18

A series of similar events occurred in Los Angeles, leading eventually to the creation of a new church. Though some Mennonites in Los Angeles were meeting informally in 1902, General Conference work began there in the years 1909 to 1914, "seeing the need for aggressive work among the Mennonites coming to Los Angeles."19 In early 1909, the Home Missions Board sent Rev. and Mrs. E. F. Grubb to Los Angeles at the request of the denomination to assist local Mennonites by providing a Mennonite place of worship and spiritual leadership. A year later, a location was found for their mission in a former pool hall, and they called it the River Station Mission. Due to "industrial expansion in the vicinity," in 1914 the mission moved and renamed itself Whosoever Will Mission.20

The mission held its first public service on May 8, 1910, which it adopted as its official date of origin, despite meeting informally as early as 1902. In 1924, the mission expanded and the group built a new church building at Seventy-Ninth and Stanford, naming it Immanuel Mennonite Church, thus closing the Whosoever Will Mission chapter of its history. This group, which received financial support for nearly twenty years from the General Conference, became self-supporting in 1931.21 In the early decades of the twentieth century, Mennonite mission work in California was not an enterprise among non-Christians, or the "unchurched"; rather, it serviced a critical mass of Mennonites living in a region without a Mennonite church.22

Immanuel Mennonite Church made an intentional connection between historical identity and twentieth-century evangelical openness in their fiftieth-anniversary publication, which included "The Purpose, Plan and History of this Church." It was a reprint of a 1924 announcement by Reverend Claassen, who explained to the local community, "The members of this church lived scattered throughout this and adjoining cities. A large number of them live here in the southern part of Los Angeles and for this reason we decided on this location, . . . [to] humbly serve the Lord Jesus." Moreover, they welcomed everyone to worship at the church. The publication explained the name "Mennonite" as given by the persecutors of "our ancestors," while noting, "Our denominational existence antedates the Reformation period. We find our forefathers in the faith in those
old evangelical bodies which blazed the way to the Reformation." Immanuel was a rare case in California, where a Mennonite church situated and marked itself both historically Mennonite and open with an active evangelical sense of mission.

As Mennonites settled permanently and established churches, by the late 1890s, the General Conference national body responded to these developments in the Paso Robles area and Southern California by creating the Pacific District Conference. This was an organizing body, defined regionally, to help coordinate Mennonite religious activity. Unlike the large administrative bureaucratic structure that it is today, at the turn of the last century it existed somewhat informally, providing largely financial and spiritual assistance to new congregations. It went about its work with a threefold rationale: "promote fellowship" among Mennonites in the Pacific region, coordinate missionary efforts in the far west, and integrate the Pacific Coast Mennonites into the structure of the national denominational body.

It was the smallest of the six General Conference Mennonite regional conferences by population, but largest in area. The increasing stream of General Conference Mennonites to Southern California from the 1880s to the early 1900s led to quick denominational response to address their religious needs and extend denominational oversight.

Beginnings in the San Joaquin Valley

In 1903, Daniel Eymann and his family moved to Upland from Kansas. Having bought a twenty-acre orange grove, they headed west for warmer winters. A few months later, they decided to move again, this time north to Reedley, just over a hundred miles away over the Tehachapi Mountains. The rest of the family boarded a train while two sons made the ten-day trip from Upland by four-horse wagon to their new home. Arriving in Reedley was exciting, as one son, Ernest, recalled later in life. Ernest was particularly impressed by the saloons; he recalled that his first memory of the town was a large brawl near one involving several men and their dogs in the middle of Main Street.

The Eymanns had become "dissatisfied with orange growing" because of high costs in Southern California. The Santa Fe Immigration Department, which promoted settlement along the San Joaquin Valley line, prompted their move to Reedley. As Mennonites moved to Reedley largely for its agricultural promise, they brought with them religious prac-
Going to California
tices, and they gathered for worship. Early participants in this congregation came from Kansas, Minnesota, and Ohio. By 1906, these settlers formally organized their congregation with the denomination and in 1908 built their first church building. Within fifty years, First Mennonite Church of Reedley had a membership of 593, made up primarily of South German and Russian immigrant Mennonites and their descendants, most of whom were fruit farmers who lived in nearby rural areas.

The Eymanns may have been at the start of Mennonite migration to the area, but they were not alone. Shortly after their move to California, their old pastor, Reverend Schellenberg of Moundridge, came to visit them and other midwestern migrants from his flock. Mennonites were on the move west. When Mennonites began moving to the Reedley area, there was already a substantial Finnish settlement formed by Finns escaping a Russian program of russification in the late nineteenth century. They were settling the area along with a Lebanese-Syrian colony, Armenians, Mexicans, Japanese, Danish, Filipinos, and soon Koreans. A direct result of the railroad, Reedley’s growth was diverse and rapid.

The Eymanns’ role in Reedley was, as noted by archivist Kevin Enns-Rempel, much more involved than agriculture. In those early years, people moved to Reedley primarily from Ohio, Missouri, Kansas, Montana, the Dakotas, and Minnesota, with backgrounds in many lines of work that were of use in the growing town: farming, business, and law. Though the Eymanns moved to farm in the area, and the Mennonites in and around Reedley organized into a religious fellowship, the Eymanns’ children, in what was atypical for American Mennonites at this time, entered professions in politics and law. The Eymann family was noteworthy for their extensive public service: producing Reedley’s first and fifth mayor, a district attorney, and a superior court judge.

It was not just a single family branching out from the usual Mennonite work. Later, as Earl Eymann entered real estate in 1930, other Mennonites began automobile dealerships in the early 1930s: Martens Chevrolet and Oldsmobile in 1930, and Enns Pontiac, Buick and GMC in 1931. Mennonites were moving to California in the early 1900s and thriving in agriculture, business, banking, and politics. These were thrilling times for Reedley. It was growing, businesses were expanding, and consumer goods increasing. As rail transportation improved through new bridge construction and increased train stops, Reedley saw its star rising.
Mennonite Brethren Beginnings

Near the same time as GC families such as the Eymanns arrived, Mennonite Brethren began moving to Reedley, in the early 1900s, leaving, like so many others, midwestern winter cold to farm and ranch in California. In the Reedley area they came as farmers, and they built up ranches, working fourteen-hour days picking almonds and fruit, irrigating vineyards and orchards, cutting alfalfa, and milking cows. Although some were beef and dairy farmers, most were grain farmers to the north and east of town, or orchard and vineyard growers to the south and west. Early church meetings were held in the home of D. T. Enns, a member of one of the early families to arrive from Kansas, who, before leaving, was “charged by Elder Abraham Schellenberg, founder of Ebenezer MB Church near Buhler [Kansas], of the spiritual welfare of the pioneer families moving here.” He took the charge seriously.33 These early settlers organized the Reedley Mennonite Brethren Church in 1905 and met in the Windsor Grammar School until they constructed a building in 1908.34

In the early twentieth century, the Reedley Mennonite Brethren thought it necessary for their children to receive an education to help with Mennonite cultural retention. By 1910, classes in religion and German began. From 1912 to 1928, the German school benefited from the serendipitous arrival of three educated Russian migrants, all accomplished educators. By the early 1920s, plans were made to create a system of education in California that included a college similar to the liberal arts school Tabor College in Kansas, though that would not take shape until the 1940s, with the creation of Pacific Bible Institute. In the mid-1920s, when the Reedley Mennonite Brethren Church split over internal divisions regarding polity and Pentecostal influences, control of the school shifted between the two factions. In 1938, the Reedley Mennonite Brethren Church opened a rival Bible academy, though in 1941, the two schools merged as Immanuel Bible School.37 Eventually, Immanuel became a local high school as educational needs changed.38

Reedley Mennonite Brethren Church was the first MB congregation in California and soon the largest Mennonite congregation in North America, with a membership reflecting its rural roots in Kansas, Oklahoma, Nebraska, Minnesota, and Russia. With fewer than 20 charter members at its start, the church grew to 1,436 members by 1957.39 By 1955, the Reed-
ley MB Church understood itself as a “lighthouse” to the world, drawing people in from all over with the “light of the gospel.” Self-identifying as a beacon on the West Coast calling the world to Christ was certainly in keeping with exceptionalist imagery for Mennonite religious missions, California cultural identity, and American evangelicalism.

Further north, Lodi represents an early instance of denominational diversity in a Mennonite Brethren church. The congregation there formed in 1907 when three Mennonites—Ludwig Reimche, Jacob Knoll, and George Bechtold—and their families arrived from Harvey, North Dakota. Initially they attended the evangelical church in nearby Victor. Striking out on their own, in 1911 they rented a house for religious services, and in 1912 organized as a Mennonite Brethren church. The membership in Lodi was composed mainly of Mennonites, Lutherans, and Baptists with Germanic background as part of the immigration from Russia to the United States in the early decades of the twentieth century. Filled to capacity at 350 in the 1920s, inner strife caused the membership to decline to about 110 in 1954. By the late 1950s, attendance hovered at about 200, giving some cause for optimism. The Lodi congregation has its roots in the Woodrow Gospel Chapel in North Dakota. Many Mennonites and other German-speaking immigrants from South Russia came between 1874 and 1888, and many of those in Woodrow in the early twentieth century from that migration to North Dakota moved to either Lodi or Saskatchewan. In the 1920s, North Dakota churches experienced a drain due largely to “California fever,” though many also moved to Saskatchewan. Eventually these two streams out of North Dakota—to Saskatchewan and to California—met in Lodi. In the Lodi MB Church records, these two migratory streams converged with hints of tensions between them.

Some Mennonite Brethren congregations, such as those in Rosedale and Bakersfield, trace their beginnings to relocated victims of the debacle at Martensdale. What has become known as the “Henry J. Martens Land Scheme” was a case of land speculation gone awry. In 1909, Henry Martens sold land in California to Mennonite families in the Midwest, going to the effort of bringing some Mennonites by rail to California to inspect the land. Although he appeared to have arranged to purchase just over 5,000 acres in California, the Mennonites involved settled on someone else’s property and were forced to move, having lost their land in the Midwest and owning none in California.

Otto and Lydia Boese, original Martensdale members, reflected on
their experiences in Bakersfield at the church’s fiftieth anniversary. The Boeses recalled that they moved from Pueblo, Colorado, to California, because California had “a magic ring to it.” After the collapse of Martensdale, the Boese family moved with other families to Bakersfield, where the Kern County Land Company donated land for them to build a church. By 1915, five years after forming a congregation and six years after forming a house group, the Bakersfield Mennonite Brethren Church formally organized, began holding street meetings, and started a jail and hospital visitation program.43

Ten miles west of Bakersfield, Rosedale Mennonite Brethren Church, also born directly from the Martensdale scheme, held the preliminary sessions in 1911 for the first Mennonite Pacific District Conference (PDC) session held a year later.44 In Shafter, the Mennonite Brethren built their “tabernacle” in 1919, also on land donated by the Kern County Land Company; by 1957, it boasted a membership of 522.45
At the first gathering of the Mennonite Brethren Pacific District Conference (PDC) in Reedley in 1912, organizers were concerned that delegates would not attend from as far away as Lodi and Escondido. If the fifteen miles between the San Marcos and Paso Robles General Conference congregations was too far for regular meetings, the 160 miles from Lodi and the 320 miles from Escondido to Reedley at this time were considerable. Nevertheless, attendance was overflowing. Despite concerns of the scattered and geographically isolated Mennonite Brethren congregations, PDC became the largest Mennonite Brethren district conference in the United States. Though that was not obvious at the start, due to the small number of Mennonite Brethren in California during the years 1909 to 1911, congregations could choose which district to join—Middle or South. Although that option to choose was short-lived, within half a
century, prodigious population growth, primarily through immigration, catapulted California into the position of largest Mennonite Brethren district in the nation.46

Traveling Evangelists

In the early 1900s, Mennonite Church congregations in California did not have locally established ministers; they were served by traveling ministers called “evangelists.” The isolation Mennonites experienced along with their lack of influence among the local population heightened their sense of religious mission. To help stabilize new congregations, traveling evangelists were sent at times by denominational conferences to hold church services and offer pastoral support to congregations. In the Pacific Coast region, these evangelists traveled along a well-worn circuit through Oregon, California, Idaho, Washington, and back to Oregon. However, sometimes these evangelists traveled on their own initiative.

Revival meetings held by the traveling evangelists were used to attract people to join the local congregations. As Timothy Smith argues, revivalism was “not ‘individualistic’ in the usual sense that term suggests; though they made faith a profoundly personal experience, their aim and outcome was to bind individuals to new communities of belief and action.”47 The individualistic component of revivalism aided the modernization of the community to which one was “bonded” through the focus on individual conversion as prescribed by the group’s precepts.48

Appreciation was expressed for any traveling evangelist who came to California. In Corning, for example, Emanuel Stahly reported that they warmly welcomed the visit of two preachers from Millersville, Pennsylvania. On two consecutive evenings, sermons were preached on Hebrews 2:1 and Revelations 3:8, with the theme of the “Open Door, and [he] earnestly admonished all to come to Christ before He would shut the door.” Stahly also made it clear that his congregation believed “it would be well if more of our eastern ministers would visit the churches west of the Rocky Mountains. We had some very warm weather, but for some time now the weather is cool and pleasant.”49 Before Christ shuts the door, the call went out, please visit us.

One popular Mennonite Church evangelist was John P. Bontrager from Albany, Oregon. Local congregations naturally used his visits to entice the churched and unchurched in their communities to attend their church. In
1908, Mennonites in Dinuba hoped Bontrager would visit their congregation, and the next year he came. Bontrager’s 1909 sermons in Dinuba were well attended: “We as a little band were very much encouraged and strengthened in the faith. Sinners were under deep conviction but would not yield.” The Mennonite Church in Dinuba had organized with seventeen members, held Bible meetings every Wednesday, and ran a Sunday school in addition to a Sunday service.

Despite this religious activity, the Dinuba congregation reported, “We are much in need of help . . . being without a minister, and extend a hearty invitation to all west-bound ministers to make this one of their stopping points. We will gladly correspond with any one who is interested in this work, country, etc.” The plea from Dinuba spoke of a need for mission to a lost humanity in their midst: “Doors are wide open to our church in California. The doctrines of our church are known to very few in the state. Souls are starving for want of the bread of life. We as a church claim to teach a pure and entire Gospel. If we are right, then many, many are living deceived.” The writer asked, “In view of this fact, can it be right in the sight of God for three and four ministers to occupy the same pulpit Sunday after Sunday, year in and year out? Is that going into all the world and preaching the Gospel to every creature?”

On the same 1909 visit to Dinuba, Bontrager also visited Porterville, where “twelve souls confessed Christ” and many more wrestled with an awakened awareness of sin. Moreover, Porterville “extend[ed] a hearty welcome to all coming to California to give us a visit.” Another evangelist, J. C. Springer from Upland, preached in Corning on September 25, 1909, and again on his way back home from Oregon and Washington on October 23. As a result of his visit, local citizens reminded eastern Mennonites that “it would be well if more of our ministering brethren would visit the small bands scattered over the Pacific Coast from time to time.”

Correspondence to the Gospel Herald that described visits such as those made by Allen Erb of La Junta, Colorado, and Bontrager, often concluded with requests that readers pray for the California church and its success in God’s work. While Bontrager was in Pasadena for revival meetings in 1913, he brought a message of encouragement from other churches for them, as they were “far from our church homes.” In 1929 Bontrager and Erb visited Los Angeles. Erb gave a series of “soul-stirring and convicting” sermons on topics such as the life of Christ, baptism of the Holy Spirit, and the Second Coming of Christ, followed by Bontrager’s sermon. The
Mennonite Church, with its small and scattered population, depended on the social network provided by the traveling evangelists, who carried messages and news from other places and maintained an apocalyptic urgency to the church’s aloneness in California. The General Conference and Mennonite Brethren also used traveling ministers, but their larger numbers facilitated an easier creation of more extensive church networks.56

By the 1930s, the focus of church work in California shifted from the traveling evangelist to organizing churches. The Mennonite Church in Winton, organized in 1931, was made up of forty-two original members who transferred their church memberships to Winton from Sacramento, Modesto, Terra Bella, Dinuba, Lemon Cove, and Los Angeles. The Winton congregation continued the process of organizing their identity around typical American Protestant development when they held their first Mission Day meeting in 1931. Mission Day was an all-day affair with sermons and a program, which became a quarterly event. The congregation also held mid-week prayer meetings and biweekly Bible study class.57

As Winton developed institutionally, the Mennonite population became increasingly racially diverse, however slightly. In 1932, the congregation’s aggressive mission outreach to the local community resulted in several Filipino attendees. That year they baptized a Filipino man and were excited by his desire to return to the Philippines to evangelize.58 J. J. Reber, a congregant of Winton, focused on the baptism of the Filipino: “We praise God for the spiritual blessings received during the revival meetings [in Winton]. Also for a Filipino brother who was received into our beloved church by water baptism on Jan. 6. We have quite a number of Filipinos who attend regularly at our services.” Significantly, despite Filipinos attending the church, it was not until one was baptized that the wider church learned of their presence, though the baptismal candidate was never named.59

With local churches building social networks through traveling evangelists and eventually organizing formally, the development of regional governing bodies began. The Pacific Coast Conference of the Mennonite Church was organized on November 1, 1906, with California, Arizona, and New Mexico joining later. In 1948, New Mexico, Arizona, and Southern California formed their own conference: the South Pacific Mennonite Conference. The South Pacific Mennonite Conference changed its name to Southwest Mennonite Conference (SWMC) a few years later, because of the great distances needed to travel for the Pacific Coast Mennonite Conference meetings.60
Members of the SWMC came from all parts of the country and included “Navajo Indians, Blacks, and Spanish Americans . . . There are many families from outside Mennonite backgrounds among us.” This multiculturalism was a point of pride: “We are cosmopolitan. This is to us a fulfillment of the commandment of Christ.” Religious pluralism was at times threatening for the Mennonite Church, but racial diversity understood as cosmopolitan and deeply Christian was a badge of honor. Despite an evolving urban sophistication, the Mennonite Church’s presence in California was always small, and several congregations attempted in Dinuba, Corning, and Terra Bella failed for reasons ranging from expensive land to malaria to competition from other churches.

Congregations that Disappeared

Mennonite successes in settling California were only part of the story, for the simple reality was that some congregations failed to survive. In 1907, a Mennonite Brethren group that had formed near San Diego in Escondido began its slow journey to oblivion. Traveling missionaries served them as they hoped for a permanent leader to move to their vicinity. That year, Elder Abraham Schellenberg, a prominent Mennonite Brethren leader, arrived, giving the small group a prominence it otherwise would not have enjoyed. The Escondido group dispersed in the early 1920s, however, after consecutive years of citrus-destroying frost.

The General Conference, in 1912, also attempted a congregation in Escondido under the guidance of Michael M. Horsch of Upland. After several families moved away, this church closed in 1934. Escondido provides an example of how the pressures of numerous religious options in an area can influence a small congregation. General Conference Mennonites were moving to the Escondido region by 1911. Shortly after building a church, GC membership dissipated throughout Southern California and parts of the San Joaquin Valley. In 1923, the local German Methodist church attempted to absorb the Mennonites who remained in the Escondido region. That action encouraged Mennonites from as far away as Upland to support their co-religionists. With such support, the General Conference church in Escondido survived until the early 1930s, when it became too expensive to maintain a congregation of only eleven members. From local historians we learn that after the sale of the Escondido building, Los Angeles Mennonite ministers visited the Mennonites who
remained. The Mennonites who stayed were discouraged, even homesick, and eventually dispersed among other churches.65

Northward, in the San Joaquin Valley, the establishment of a Mennonite institutional presence was tied directly to the availability of water for agricultural use. In the early decades of the twentieth century, the Central Valley Water Project was planned and constructed to bring enough water to the Central Valley to support an agricultural economy. By 1930 there had been so much groundwater pumping in the Central Valley that its agricultural economy was set to collapse. As a six-year drought began in 1929, agricultural interests and water access began to dominate state politics. Finally, in 1933, Sacramento passed the massive Central Valley Project Act. Because of the Depression, the bonds needed to finance the Central Valley Project (CVP) did not sell well, and President Franklin Roosevelt, through the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, took control of the project. All this occurred as a historic drought crushed the Great Plains, and Oakies (migrant farm workers from Oklahoma) hit the road for California. After much political struggle over funding and land reclamation, and fierce opposition by privately held utilities, CVP construction began in 1937, and it finally brought water to the San Joaquin Valley in 1951.66

Economic struggles and a lack of water conspired to make life difficult. One church established in Dos Palos, Merced County, in 1930, lasted only until 1933. Despite initial optimism, “it was discontinued because of failure of promised water for irrigation.”67 As one Mennonite correspondent wrote, “California is not worth 5c[ents] an acre if it has no water. Water is the gold of California.”68 Without the promised water, the community crumbled.69

The Dos Palos story is part of California’s troubled history with water. Donald Worster argues that in a society formed around centralized water control, the power to succeed or fail was often in the impersonal hands of the few who managed that “coercive, monolithic, and hierarchical system.”70 When it was clear that the water promised Dos Palos was a mirage, Mennonite farmers out of necessity moved away.

The Mennonite Brethren also attempted to settle Dos Palos and failed. Water and isolation did to them as to the others. Entreaties to send religious and spiritual assistance made by the Mennonite Brethren in Reedley to the Pacific District Conference resulted in quarterly song festivals, prayer, and preachers; none of it helped. In 1933, with no irrigation, a depressed economy, and neighbors moving away as land was repossessed, the
Dos Palos Mennonite Brethren group disbanded. Two denominations attempted simultaneous settlements at Dos Palos and both failed. As Kevin Enns-Rempel observes, Dos Palos was “a victim of economic hardship and spiritual isolation,” exacerbated by a land company that failed to provide water.\textsuperscript{71}

**Religious Options**

A significant part of the California context was the variety of religious options. Some saw the challenge of these options as especially powerful. By the late 1930s, Pastor D. D. Eitzen observed that Mennonite identity in Los Angeles was fluid and loyalty to the denomination weak. He estimated that about half of the Mennonites in the Los Angeles area attended the Church of the Open Door, which was affiliated with the fundamentalist Bible Institute of Los Angeles (BIOLA). Other churches that attracted Mennonites included the Presbyterian Church of Glendale, Christian Science churches, and Aimee Semple McPherson’s Foursquare Gospel churches, along with “innumerable cults that thrive in this favorable California climate.” Mennonite churches in the eastern states paid “little or no attention” to the condition of Mennonites in California, who were vulnerable to myriad religious alternatives.\textsuperscript{72}

Though Eitzen gave no specific reasons for the dissatisfaction of Mennonites with their churches, they were nonetheless attracted to evangelical and conservative congregations that were very much part of the larger history of Southern California’s development. Weakened ties with eastern denominational structures lent itself to a fervent entrepreneurial spirit that was part of the California religious context. The absence of the General Conference Mennonite establishment, which was centered in the Midwest, combined with a rich diversity of available religious alternatives permitted Mennonites in Southern California to avail themselves of the religious options in a pluralistic society—similar to a canopy through which the winds of society blew freely.\textsuperscript{73}

North in the San Joaquin Valley, economic realities and religious options took a toll on a GC church in Shafter. Henry Krehbiel, an early twentieth-century General Conference leader, came to California in 1908 for the climate and stayed as a pastor in Reedley. As pastor, he bought and tended “several California fruit orchards” and lived in the area of Reedley locally known as “Mennonite Row.” He was the pastor of Reedley
General Conference Mennonite Church until 1927, when he suffered a severe heart attack. He died October 5, 1940. Krehbiel also led the development of the Shafter First Mennonite Church (GC), which served Mennonites who migrated to the area in 1918–1919. The Shafter church fell victim to the Depression when low fruit prices and increased irrigation costs devastated the local economy. Some Mennonites moved away, and the rest joined other denominations as the church was dissolved. The church’s story did not end there, however; in 1935 Krehbiel returned to Shafter, restarted the church, and two years later, attracted enough Mennonites to join that they built their own building.

Mennonites Engage Modernity?

Churches, schools, and regional governing bodies mediated the migrants’ experience with California society through social networks and recog-
nizable religious structures. Change was not the nemesis of Mennonite cultural and religious identity, though it was often suspect and anxiety producing. A mixing of traditional Mennonite “ethnic” concerns with religious markers of identity propelled Mennonites in California to look more to the future and less to the past. As they became acculturated Americans, their concerns were often the worldly present and the future, while attempting to remain faithful to their spiritual inheritance. The traveling evangelists, the Reedley school, and the general Mennonite emphasis on organizing communities around churches helped set boundaries with the wider world and provided institutional context to their religious and cultural identity.

The Mennonite Brethren, the largest Mennonite group in California, were largely evangelical and congregated mostly in the San Joaquin Valley, where they constructed institutions that helped to negotiate their boundaries with the larger world. Ironically, after World War II, this strategy encouraged their assimilation into California’s social and evangelical culture. In the early period of their California experience, their school, which was constructed to teach German and the Bible, in fact became a community high school.

Timothy Smith argues that such a theologically informed process contradicts a secularization interpretation. In some realms of the Mennonite experience, accommodation was made between religious impulses and secular society to such an extent that little distinction could be made between them. Secularization marks a realignment of identity, seeking justification more from society and less from religion. A Kansas Mennonite in the early 1950s observed that the distinctive Californian social environment was known well enough in other parts of the country: “It might be well for the rest of the Mennonites to look to the California churches who have had to face the trend to urbanization for some time both on the farm and in the city.” Mennonites looking westward in the postwar period understood that something was happening in California that would soon happen in the east.

Thus, during the early decades of the twentieth century, California Mennonites not only explored their new environment through a religious and spiritual language, which is explored in chapters 2 and 3, but also set about constructing an institutional culture. By the 1930s, Mennonites had organized several churches and created regional governing bodies, which always grouped California with neighboring states. Thus, Mennonites
made visible their sense of religious and cultural identity. This institutional development also expanded to include other visible manifestations of Mennonitism, including health care and higher education.

Deep in these congregational and denominational stories, however, was the siren call of California’s arcadian climate, which at times resulted in dramatic church growth, and at other times, tremendous loss, even failure. As I discuss in the next chapter, California was simultaneously Promised Land, Paradise Lost, healer, feverish swamp, fertile, and parched. California was also a place where religious boundaries within conservative Protestantism were porous and geographic distances great—exacerbating existing cultural-religious anxieties. Yet, it provided a natural canvas on which Mennonites illustrated their cosmology. As they set about the day-to-day tasks of settling in a new home, a rich sense of religious identity was unintentionally drawn out.